

## CZECHS AT HOME AND FAR AWAY

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THE Czechs today find themselves in a situation like that of 1620 following the battle of the White Mountain. Then also there were conflicts between two sections of the Bohemian population; in the heat of controversy they spread all over Europe and led to the Thirty-Years War. Today's struggle is national; in those years it was not only national but religious. The Czech nobility and bourgeoisie, long settled in Bohemia, had been for two centuries devoted to the reform doctrines of Jan Hus; in the teaching of Martin Luther they saw liberation from Catholicism, the Jesuits and also from Hapsburg domination. Thus in 1618 the Bohemian insurrection against the House of Hapsburg was the spark that set off the great European explosion just as Hitler's invasion of Bohemia was the precursor of the outbreak of the war today. Then, too, the first decisive movement had disastrous consequences for the Czechs. Political and cultural oppression endured until the ideas of the French Revolution matured and were expressed in the national cultural uprising of about 1800. The introduction of constitutionalism in Austria in 1848 led gradually to the spiritual emancipation and finally, through the last Great War, to the political independence of the Czech nation. Once again on March 15, 1939, all was apparently destroyed by Hitler's entrance into Prague and the establishment of the "Protectorate."

At this moment, when the survival of Czech culture appears threatened, it may be well to recall that even the battle of the White Mountain failed to annihilate the national language, the customs, or even the religion which passed through the fire of the Jesuit Inquisition. On the contrary, oppression appeared to intensify the spiritual powers of this people. The noble figure of Jan Amos Comenius, driven from his home and fleeing from one Moravian fraternity to another until finally he became a refugee from his country, is an eternal symbol of Czech culture in exile. Like his successor, Thomas G. Masaryk, he taught the doctrines of humanism abroad. His ethical and pedagogical principles bore fruit in the great "enlightenment" of the eighteenth century.

Even in that century the wandering Czech musician was a familiar figure. Completely impoverished after the battle of the White Mountain, the country could no longer support the practice of music, and as a rule the practitioners were unwilling to give up the faith of their fathers. So the spirit of the Bohemian minstrel was carried all over Europe, to become a vital force in the changing musical style that emerged around 1750. The Czechs Stamitz, Richter, Filz, Mysliveczek, Tuma, Zelenka, Zach, Wanhall and many others, broke through the German Protestant and Austrian Catholic baroque music forms with a melody and rhythm rooted deep in the Czech folk. To the old stiff toccatas, concertos, and suites they set up the opposition of the new symphonic form with its thematic dualism. In that period there were literally thousands of Bohemian musicians living in Germany, Austria, France, and Italy; the lists of early European orchestras are studded with Czech names.

This emigration of musicians did not come to an end with the eighteenth century. Around 1810 the Czech Worzischek arrived in Vienna; it was his lyrical piano compositions which inspired Schubert's *Impromptus* and the *Moments Musicaux*. Smetana, who gave his powerful stamp to the Czech music of the nineteenth century, traveled to Sweden. Returning home he worked out the ideas for his great national music dramas. Finally Dvorak and Gustav Mahler made the long journey to America.

But since the eighteenth century there has been a basic change in the Czech situation. From that time on when the emigrants returned to their own country, they found a vital and flourishing musical life. To live and work it was no longer necessary for a musician to play the violin in a court orchestra of middle Germany; now one could hope to become director of the conservatory or of the opera in Prague.

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Today, at first glance, seems to mark a reversion to the long distant past. The Czech boundaries are hermetically sealed. Musicians who have not already fled are not now even in a position to leave their country, unless they seek employment in Germany and are willing to surrender completely to the doctrines of Nazism.

Let us then first take a brief count of the Czechs already outside their homeland. Again we find a great number of Czech musicians working abroad. Bohuslav Martinu, influenced by *Les Six* and Stravinsky, has become almost a Frenchman, so zealously has he thrown himself open to foreign influences. This earnest desire for assimilation is expressed also

in Jaromir Weinberger and Jarosl Jezek, both in America, and both already affected by American folklore and rhythm. Rudolf Friml, Czech by birth, is today completely Americanized. Similarly, Vlack-Vruticky has become a Yugoslav composer, and Ottokar Hrimaly a Ukrainian, while Josef Hüttel writes in Egypt and has become almost a national Arabian composer. Some of these emigres in far places appear to fill the role performed by Dvorak who was once hailed as the awakener of a new national American music. Walter Kaufmann, born in Karlsbad, had his wanderlust aroused after hearing recordings of Indian and Arabian music; trusting to luck, he set out for Bombay where today he is director of the Western Music Department for the radio. His compositions, especially the opera *Der Hammel bringt es an den Tag*, and his *Indian Symphony* show an extraordinary mixture of Czech diction and Oriental melody. The Prague composer, Julius Laska, who journeyed to Tokyo is now associated with the Imperial Conservatory. His tender songs, despite their traces of French impressionism, show a deep insight into the Japanese spirit.

But what goes on within the Motherland? Reviews which appear here in current journals with a Prague date-line tell us only of the "cosmopolitan" character of music in the Czech city. Chiefly they list the performances of the old, standard repertory. Since the reporters are of course subject to Nazi censorship we hear nothing of those well attended "private" concerts, given over to works by composers who represent the "oppositional tendency"—the democrats. Nor of the presentation of the *Magic Flute*, in a Czech version; this is especially censorable since the translator, Paul Eisner, was a Jew. Czech cultural life has been to some degree throttled by the supervision of the Czech-Aryan Culture Society, an organization small in number, but influential, fascist and supported by the Gestapo. But some superficial "cultural autonomy" is presumably guaranteed under the protectorate. Taking full advantage of this formal promise the artists' group, Maj, has shown a strong leftist majority in the election of officers; this is the direction too of the leading composers' organization, Hudebni matice.

Until "Munich" the musical life of the Czechs was European in character. Since then, Mahler, who was nowhere more cultivated than in Prague, has disappeared from the repertory. Schönberg, Krenek, and even Hindemith have also dropped out of hearing. The Society for Contemporary Music has suspended its activity. The old Czech Ständetheater, in which Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was first performed, has been taken over by

the Nazis and is now utilized for German patriotic plays. The New German Theatre, with which Mahler, Muck, Egon Pollak, Bodanzky, Klemperer, Zemlinsky, Stransky, Kleiber, and most recently Georg Szell and Karl Rankl had been associated, is now closed; its swan-song was Krenek's *Karl V*. The concert life of the Czechs is restricted to official operatic performances in the National Theatre. The Philharmonic concerts, formerly directed by men like Toscanini, Walter, Busch, Kleiber and others of renown are now conducted by Talich and by Raphael Kubelik, the son of the well-known violinist. Practically undisturbed are the extremely conservative presentations of the Chamber Music Society.

Although the radio is now controlled by the Gestapo, broadcasts exhibit a persistent tendency toward opposition. During a recent speech on the deceased singer, Emil Pollert, one could hear the following uncensored words: "Today we are not allowed to hear this great Czech singer, because he is a Jew." A recent lecture on Czech music included this challenge: "Czech rhythm has a sharp attack; the Bohemian polka has its own wild abandon; the Czech looks neither to left nor right, but ever forward — he knows that everything must once again turn out well." Apparently the Gestapo works under certain limitations. In February there was a broadcast from a "private" home concert of new music for the piano by Viktor Ullmann, one of Schönberg's most successful pupils, whose works have been performed at recent international music festivals. Vyepalek, Jirak, Kricka, Vomacka, and H. Karel still keep their positions; a festival has even been given in honor of J. B. Förster and Haba's quarter-tone class with its numbers somewhat restricted, still continues. Although the three young musicians Reiner, Wismeyer and Süsskind, have had to leave Prague, their works were recently performed. Indeed many a member of the young generation of composers who is either politically or racially not agreeable to the new regime now sits silent in a concentration camp! Also I have heard that works by the young musicians Jarosl Zich, Vitesl Nejeldy (the son of Zdenek Nejeldy, leader of Czech music and professor of musicology at the university, who was forced to escape), Isa Krejci, and others, continue to be given in the afore-mentioned "private" concerts. How long even this privilege will be permitted no one can tell.

Like all Czech cultural life, Czech music is at the moment, almost dormant. But let no one confuse this sleep with death. The Czechs are a noble, proud people, of enduring musical vitality. Come what may they will live again and so will their music. They withstood the siege of the White Mountain, they will outlast Munich.